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THE MIRACULOUS APPEAL OF MEDIOCRITY

By CARL ENGEL

Sir, it is burning a farthing candle at Dover, to show light at Calais.

—DR. JOHNSON.

AMONG the many injustices, in which the annals of mankind are so rich, there is perhaps none more cruel than the long-continued and unreasonable persecution of Mediocrity. To be sure, dear to the heart of mortal man, mediocrity has never lacked defenders of one sort or another. But they have always been either timorous apologists or double-faced opportunists. For, although mediocrity has been despised by many who thought themselves superior, it has been "used" by not a few of them. We might have pointed with pride to the wisdom of Horace, Rome's jovial bard of alcoholic bliss and female pulchritude, who sang so eloquently of, and for, *aurea mediocritas*, were it not that his haughty *Odi profanum vulgus* put him down as the cunning actor who filched applause from the gallery while playing to the boxes. And thus one of mediocrity's reputed chief-supporters stands revealed as the prototype of its fiercest foe, the Snob. This insatiable parasite, for whom no pleasure is too rare, no beauty too exquisite, has usurped prerogatives in a domain which he himself has circumscribed by bounds of his own making, and which, if you please, he has labelled "Art" and placarded with "None but the Chosen may enter!" Unfortunately, he has not constantly attended to the choosing with rigorous care; hence no end of confusion has arisen. And matters have become greatly complicated by the fact that he has permitted the hallowed precinct to be parcelled into smaller and supposedly choicer circles, through which an eager throng of the admitted fluctuates incessantly. To keep some semblance of order, the policing of the district has been entrusted to the Critic, who aims at proper segregation of his wards, and labors hard to establish the unimportant facts, that one group is nearer the center than another; that the vaunted exploits of some one are mere trespassing upon the heritage of a neighbor; or that certain centripetal aspirations of the outer ring must be discouraged and dismissed as futile. All of which to confirm the suspicion that we are not born equal, that no

man is free, and that the pursuit of absolute and ultimate happiness is vain. Yet, in spite of the Critic's indefatigable efforts, things have not been going well, of late, with our friend, the Snob. The battlements of his stronghold have been crumbling under missiles thrust from without, and something akin to revolution—a periodical house-cleaning—is threatening him from within. Light is beginning to dawn in quarters other than his alone; the sun of Mediocrity is slowly and majestically rising.

It is remarkable how this handful of Chosen Ones was able, for so long, to curtain the Greater Orb, and succeeded in blinding the rest of humanity with pretty strontia fires. Antique Athens under the Tyrant, mediæval Rome under the Pope, immortal France under *le Roi Soleil*, are but a few of the set pieces and pin-wheels with which the pyrotechnists have amused themselves and kept the multitude at a respectable distance. But the distance is spanned by the magic of democracy, and the multitude is coming into its own. With it, mediocrity is taking its rightful and dominant place in the world.

Whence the disparaging implication which the word "mediocrity" had assumed? Originally, in the Aristotelian sense, it was the true philosopher's highest ambition to attain a state of mediety, "equally removed from two opposite extremes." This presupposes, as Hobbes says, that "Virtue consisteth in Mediocrity and Vice in Extremes," the excess being possible in both directions, of good and of bad. Bacon still speaks of a thing that fails to satisfy, as falling "beneath mediocrity," which plainly shows what he understood to be the normal line of demarcation and the standard of desirability. But gradually a change took place. It was left for Southey, the crabbed laureate, to bluster out: "The mediocres in every grade aim at pleasing the public." Here we have it. Fie! for shame! and tut! So it is noble to please crowned heads, but a crime to please the public! Quite evidently, not every poet is so versatile as Horace. One cannot help feeling that Southey touched a very sore spot, and touched it rather rudely. The whole case hinges upon the question whether his statement, being true, does not justify the existence and practices of what he terms "the mediocres." And who are the mediocres, so-called? Southey probably would have subscribed to an opinion generally held among the occupants of the aforementioned sacred zone, namely, that man, as a representative of the species, is interesting only when he shows the animal that lurks in him, or when he approaches the superhuman. There are those who would restrict their interest to the rare instances when the two extremes meet—when beast and superman are blended, as in genius. Just think, how uncomfortable it would be to live with only brutish

dolts and brilliant cranks around us ! It is the plain "human, all-too-human" that makes our terrestrial globe so congenial an abode for all anthropomorphous creatures. Dear, dependable, and unadulterated man remains inveterately attached to his herd, and relies for his main support on the realization that he belongs to the Great Majority—that imposing body which cannot err. George Bernard Shaw, in a searching probe of anarchism, upbraids "Mr. Benjamin R. Tucker, of Boston, Mass." for the gentleman's suggestion that "The right of the majority is absolute." Indeed a splendid basis for the constitution of a State Socialistic country, familiarly known as Utopia. In its real meaning, however, the article has always existed and found application; only it should read: "The majority is absolutely right." Since safety seems to lie in numbers, mankind—pardonably resolved upon "safety first"—clings faithfully to mediocrity. And not without reward. Anæmic masses are warmed by mediocrity into cheerfully munching their daily bread; and their appetite is daily waxing for a larger slice of it.

Nay, they are going farther. They recently discovered cake, and are now bent on having the cherry on the tartlet.

Naturally, this presumption has created a great deal of disturbance in the sacerdotal pastry-shops. The vituperations have been many and bitter. While every one admits, although the heartless but reluctantly, that a state or condition may be unnecessarily bad, no one, outside of mediocrity, seems willing to concede that there is such a thing as the undesirably good. The result is utterly confounding. Whistler, who never minced matters, did so least when he wrote: "Mediocrity, flattered at acknowledging mediocrity, and mistaking mystification for mastery, enters the fog of dilettantism, and, graduating connoisseur, ends its days in a bewilderment of *bric-à-brac* and Brummagem." Pray, heed not the polished phrases, the felicitous choice of words, let not clever alliterations dim your vision; mark only the merciless indictment ! What an inhuman lot your "artists" are ! They seem to forget that the First Artist, being in the enviable position of finding himself without critics at the moment when he viewed his work, pronounced it good. Whatever later comment may have been passed on the correctness of this judgment, the work betrays the Master, and satisfaction with their own creations is not uncommon among men. How could it be otherwise: vanity is the root of all cavil. Only by the blessings of flattery are we enabled to preserve peace about us, and flattery begins at home. The obtrusive candor of a Whistler must necessarily lead to "the gentle art of making enemies"; and it would seem sometimes that friends and flattery are more essential

to success than is talent. At all events, talent must be born, whereas friends and followers can be made. With judicious and lavish publicity our advertising mediocrity has arrived at gaining a very considerable foothold. Society is a complex organism, in which each individual is rated according to the opinion that the others hold of him, while he is governed by the fear of that opinion. A *modus vivendi* has tacitly been accepted, known as politeness—or flattery, if you will; for the two are kin. The important thing is not that some object of our fancy be perfected, in shape, in color, or in tone, but that an opinion of the object be created, and that it be a politely favorable one. Mediocrity has realized this great truth, and, by working on its principle, is proving the practical value of flattery.

As to mediocrity “mistaking mystification for mastery,” the idea is preposterous. What mediocrity is doing, is to display the admirable courage of insisting that mastery, being distinctly an extreme of accomplishment, is reprehensible. We are returning to the sober tenets of Aristotle’s school. More than that. Allowing, to a certain degree, an excuse for “masterly” products, but wishing to make these the property of the many, instead of a privilege belonging to the few, mediocrity has shown that, by skillful reproduction, such treasures may be made accessible to all who care for them, and thereby lose the objectionable touch of particularity. Our machine-driven age has made this mystification completely possible, and some of the reproductions improve on the originals. The machine is mediocrity’s great ally. The picture of Mr. Whistler’s own mother, sepulchred in the catacombs of the Luxembourg, becomes eternized only when turned out on the rotogravure presses of our newspaper syndicates by millions of copies, to be given out as pictorial supplement on “Mother’s Day,” so that thumb-tacks may hold it on the wall of the humblest hut, to cover a weather stain. A thing of beauty should be a joy for everybody, and to make everybody share in it, mediocrity resorts to imitation. To all intents and purposes, imitation is fully as good as the genuine thing, if not preferable. It has generally the advantage of being cheaper, thereby coming within reach of the greater number. Through a reduction in cost, its acquisition demands a lesser sacrifice, and its loss is more lightly borne. Gratified desire and minimized disappointment are mediocrity’s great contributions towards worldwide serenity. Wander through the palatial grandeurs of the modern department store, look at the bargain counters that hold fair evidence of what the people think they want, and the astonishing ingenuity in the only useful art, the art of imitation,

will be instantly patent. The primordial longing to adorn our person and our home is kindled by a ravishing display of magentas and veridian greens, luminous and rich, to which we willingly succumb. Imitation is the keystone of the whole establishment. From imitation jewelry, imitation sealskin and imitation Hepplewhite, there is but a step to the stall where imitation music is for sale. And here, perhaps, we have mediocrity's finest and most humanitarian gift.

Mediocrity cannot be accused of ignoring the charm that "bright Apollo's lute" commands, as it has given us machine-made music and musicians. There are huge plants in every country, where aspiring youths are transformed into musicians, trained in all branches of their trade. By a patented process, some of these institutions contrive to obliterate any personal trait in their product, and impart to it the inestimable quality of being inoffensively commonplace. There are large and prosperous enterprises, where music is written to order and "hits" are turned out while you wait. A little cash will tap the tun of liquid notes, and the strong waters from the still of men, maligned as musical moonshiners, will freely flow for him who has the necessary price and innocence. Music has its factory patterns of modulation and cadence; it has harmonic progressions and melodic "twists" which bear the characteristics of slang, or again resemble the glib and inane prattle of fops. Now, slang forms the only intelligible medium of expression for a surprisingly large number of people, who take the hurdles of grammar with the same unconcern with which they will pass over a piano which is out of tune. "How to play pieces in ten lessons" is no longer a secret held by the few, and disclosed by them at fifty cents per revelation; most pieces devised *ad usum populi* are wisely made to resemble each other so much, that one lesson may suffice to know them all. While our unsophisticated amateurs will grant trifling differences between the melodies of one and the other of these compositions, they are content that the accompaniment should remain the same for all of them. Exaggeration?—possibly. There are always those with "classic leanings," who closely distinguish between the bass of one Beethoven sonata and that of another, and play all of them with equal accuracy and the same impassiveness.—And what of the high-flown speech affected by our musical pioneers and coxcombs? What is advance and evolution, what is empty flourish and cryptic apery? Anything that defies understanding is undefeasible. Music of the fourth dimension must naturally sound a little strange to an ear that has not reached the requisite stage of development. But all modern music that is essentially "queer" is good—for the time being. Exaggeration?—most

likely. There remain always those who bid you read metaphysics and theosophy into these works; who play them all with the same acuteness of divination and equal want of persuasiveness.

Mediocrity is in a fair measure rectifying all this. There is under way a process of levelling that will inevitably establish a "happy mean," in music as in all other things. The community is taking a hand in such matters; enthusiasts are arousing the citizens to join in public "sings," and give the inarticulate soul of the People its first opportunity for self-expression by untying the vocal cords of the crowd. What these laryngeal sports may lack in style, they more than make up for in vogue. Anyhow, style being something that is often difficult to attain, mediocrity has resolved to rank it among the undesirable extremes, and has substituted fashion in its stead. Of course, it must take some time until the wisdom of this step will be apparent to all, and it is not surprising, therefore, that Debussy the critic, with an eye on the imitators of Debussy the composer, wrote in the *S. I. M.*:

The thousand little customs to which an epoch submits, apply to all the world; and this is wholly arbitrary, since they serve, most often, only a single person. Let us illustrate this assertion by a rather homely example: A man with a large head finds, after long meditations before the mirror of his hatter, a shape of hat which seems to make the size of his head appear smaller, and naturally he adopts it; what is less natural is that you see immediately other people (nor are they all idiots) wear hats which make them look ridiculous. We'll be told that this is a matter of fashion, not of taste. This is not quite true. Fashion and taste are very closely related, at least so they should be; and if we consent to be ridiculous in the choice of a hat, there is good reason to be sure that this ridicule will extend over everything that has to do with taste, including that of music, the most delicate to define.

But taste should not be discussed, unless kept above discussion. In spite of what Debussy may have thought, or Hazlitt written in his caustic essay on "Vulgarity and Affectation," fashion, and fashion alone, is the thing. Mediocrity has clearly recognized the fact, and has accordingly set its stamp of approval on everything that is ruled by fashion. Music, in turn, has undergone this wholesome subjection and is a great deal better for it, or at least the public is. For while it may not always be easy to distinguish good art from bad, one is sure to know fashionable art, and therefore to be more "*à la hauteur du temps*." Here again, mediocrity is taken to task by the high bonzes in the temple-yard for a display of what is malevolently called "dilettantism."

Is dilettantism really so odious as the painter of "Battersea Bridge" would have us think? Was he not too severe, and did he

not mistake a blessing for a bane? It would seem so, if we believe Paul Bourget, the accomplished romancer and sympathetic portrayer of the poor victims of wealth and culture. Modern society and its peculiarities have received his special attention. Shrewd diagnostician that he is, he could not fail to see the importance of dilettantism to-day, and he pronounces himself with no uncertain voice when he claims that "dilettantism is a logical product of our contemporary society. Before acting upon it, dilettantism results from it." He tells us, furthermore, that the dilettante, instead of fighting for art, accepts it; and Bourget adds: "But this is precisely what makes of dilettantism a new sort of dialectic, thanks to which our intelligence shares in the infinite fecundity of things." The able advocate, who is cutting one coat to fit both *des Esseintes* and the *boursier parvenu* of the Avenue Malakoff, might have qualified for admission to the Tailors' Union, had he not preferred to be identified with the French Academy. There is too much fighting in the world, as it is, and it would be most welcome if it could at least be kept out of peaceful pursuits. The dilettante fulfills a pacifying mission, and he should be encouraged in not only accepting, but in taking for granted, certain things in art and life, which art is too vast and life too short to "verify" or fight for. There are charming dilettanti who read their Ruysbroeck, if mystically inclined, play Monteverdi and Stravinsky for their pastime, who discourse intelligently on Kou K'ai-tche or Hokusai, and yet have escaped reading "Les Misérables," never heard "The Messiah," and stayed eight-and-forty hours in Amsterdam without going to see "The Night Watch" at the Rijks-Museum, but sampled instead the various drams of Messrs. Erven Bols and Wynand Focking *in loco quo*. Thus the dilettante, taking delight in what is more finely attuned to his individual pitch and personal key, soon graduates "connoisseur," a term as variedly shaded and graded as are the different shades and grades of "*bric-à-brac* and Brummagem" to which his heart is drawn by preference.

The connoisseur has the great advantage of speaking with authority; and since authority lends dignity to a person, another mark—once the distinguishing cloak of a few—becomes the uniform garb of all modern arbiters in matters artistic. So long as the multitude was kept from sitting in the Areopagus, the judges pronounced their verdict with blind disregard for the opinion of the masses. Now this is changed. Official panegyrists or detractors take their cue from the more dependable promptings of income-tax rumors. Public favor, as expressed in box-office offerings, has become the accepted criterion. And the influence of public favor reaches farther.

The talking machine and player-piano, among other devices, have been of inestimable assistance to mediocrity, by enabling it to assert, directly and in unmistakable manner, its own preferences in music. No matter what the snob may decree hereafter, mediocrity will no longer depend on him for guidance, but reach out and take what it likes. No royal or imperial court will set the tone, no plutocracy monopolize the highest-paid virtuosi. Sound-reproducing instruments have been improved to a point that borders on the incredible. But being mere imitation and multiplication, they avoid coming under the head of undesirable exclusiveness. In the pleasant intimacy of the home, the Victrola and Pianola offer an inexhaustible source of diversion and education. The members of the family form an audience more keenly discriminating for the variety of labels and the price set on each brand. A generation of musical connoisseurs is in the making, raised by imaginative press agents, by enterprising publishers and manufacturers, and by performing automata.

Imitation again—and of a wonderful sort—is at the root of the most remarkable flower of mediocrity's cultivation: the moving pictures. All classes, acknowledging the bankruptcy of conversation, have become their fervent devotees. An invention which might have easily degenerated into the prime recorder of truth, has been wisely turned to serve the ends of fake and fiction, to the accompaniment of similarly treated music. A "Battling Bully" whips his brat to the tune of one of Wagner's hammering heroes. Genuine blossoms are broken and strewn in the path of the public, that is not easily deceived, and knowingly winks at these paper petals, while it inhales from artificial bloom the aromatic perfumes of Cathay. Illusion celebrates its greatest triumph. The Muses on Olympus, old and weary, are welcoming a tenth and youngest sister, "Pseudo," who is preparing to take over all the work of her nine elders.

There is progress in other fields. The antiquated, stuffy "salon" with its tedious dissertations and amiable chatter, has been abolished in recognition of the fact that the body needs exercise more than the mind. *Thés dansants* and supper dances are creating a demand for ever-new and inspiring strains. What aimed to be soul-stirring, must now be body-moving. Nothing is permitted to grow stale, and mediocrity is exhibiting a baffling fertility to keep up the supply.

Much to the confusion of snobbish ethnologists and folk-lorists, a new voice of the people is making itself heard more and more clearly; a voice not marred by "indigenous" accents, but rich in

superb melodic inflections, pulsating with unparalleled rhythmic swing, and which, at its best, is matchless. The pronounced exoticism of a good deal of this music is self-evident; but is it not more Asiatic than African, and does it not perhaps hark back to Palestine rather than to the Congo? It is a fascinating mixture, this unique idiom, wherever it may come from. There are rags that are mysterious, there are others that are grand. The peculiar art of "ragging" may be a mania, but it is surely not more singular than was the 18th-century craze for *fioretti* and *gruppetti*. One is rhythmic eccentricity, the other was melodic surfeit. We may safely rely on mediocrity to take care of all excesses and to restore the equilibrium, when the proper time arrives.

What few singers and players are left, whose accomplishments might transgress the measure of mediocrity in the direction of unnecessary artistic ability, show in the making of their programs that they know how to side-step all danger. Great names have given succor to the cause, and the greatest have become the shibboleth of rural vastnesses. How far we are from the days when Fanny Burney wrote to her dear "daddy Crisp":

There is at this moment no such thing as conversation. There is only one question asked, meet whom you may, namely: 'How do you like Gabrielli?' and only two modes, contradictory, to be sure, but very steady, of reply; either: 'Of all things upon earth!' or 'Not the least bit in the whole world!'

The favored and select who, once upon a time, passed such judgment on an admired artist, have been multiplied beyond counting, divided still though they be on the merits of this or that popular "record" or "film."

Popularity is mediocrity's all-powerful lure. It is the highest test of efficiency, and the supreme reward that the populace offers any one who succeeds in pleasing it. With thrones and crowns disappearing at a dizzy pace, the "poet laureate" is no longer required to sing the legendary deeds and virtues of royal personages. His attention is claimed wholly by the Sovereign People and their needs. What they need to-day, as much as they did in ancient Rome, is "*panem et circenses*"—food and amusement! As a purveyor of the latter, mediocrity is earning more laurels, not to mention shekels, than scoffing Robert Southey did. We have done with the disdain and pride of a Gavarni, who said: "*C'est parce que je suis du peuple que je hais la populace*," and did not even see fit to mitigate his statement by a Horatian word in favor of mediocrity, golden or other. He was in London when the French revolution of 1848 broke out, and wrote to one of his friends in Paris:

Ah, you take the populace for the people! You want to establish a communism between decent kind and the rabble, and is it enough that one be sufficiently *pas grand'chose*, to have the right to a gun? Very well! You have sown shot-guns and you'll reap gun-shots. Plant, my dears, trees of liberty; partake as brothers from the banquet food; sing those revolutionary hymns to the glory of the People, and then reckon up how much money, earned by the work of workers, it will take to pay for the sloth of soap-box orators.

Such apprehensions, not infrequently voiced in our own day, seem altogether groundless. *Sansculottes* and Bolsheviki may have found it incumbent for reasons best, and perhaps only, known to themselves, to destroy a great many works of art. That does not mean that they have seriously attempted in the past, or intend in the future, to eliminate all artistic power of creation. Art, in a soberly mediocre degree and imitative way, will doubtless be tolerated and encouraged in the most democratic state, in so far as it may contribute to the pleasures of the people. Those who will recklessly insist on surpassing the official limitations of originality and excellence, will be punished as heretofore, only more relentlessly, by having their work relegated to the museum or to the shelves of the library, while not a few of the worst offenders will be made to suffer in mind and body for their arrogant crime of being "different"—in the *Stendhalien* sense. The wiser ones—inspired by Pseudo, the Universal Muse—will do well to heed the imperious call of vindicated Mediocrity.